The mysterious great stone faces of Easter Island. . . . Men of science of two expeditions will climb the island's grassy hillsides to study them.

SCIENCE STRIVES to SOLVE

The RIDDLE of the GREAT STONE FACES

Two more expeditions are lured to Easter Island in the never-ending hope of unlocking the baffling secret of the queer statue-sentinels on its shores

BY EMILY C. DAVIS.

EASTER ISLAND, loneliest inhabited isle in the Pacific, will be invaded by two scientific expeditions this year. A party of French-Belgian-Swiss scientists has already landed. Americans will arrive later. The men of science will climb grassy hillsides of the island to peer at hundreds of great stone faces that have so far outsphynxed the sphynx in determined silence about the past.

In some long-ago era of hustling energy, Easter Islanders turned out statuary by the ton. Using volcanic craters on the island as quarries, the people carved out heads and torsos—little fellows 3 feet high, big fellows 20, 30 feet, even one giant 70 feet tall. Both men and women were portrayed.

They had a pattern for their art, and they stuck to it. The stone faces had to have long noses, disdainful mouths, jutting eyebrows.

In another quarry, workers ran a stone hat factory, hewing out a red-tinted stone for top hats to adorn the heads of gray stone giants. A red hat for a 30-foot giant would weigh fully three tons.

When an image was finished, the workers slid it down the hillside, and then somehow pulled or pushed the statues—some weighed as much as 40 tons—to an appropriate site. All the faces were made to turn inland, toward the graves of Easter Island's dead.

THE world's strangest art gallery came to have more than 600 of the images. And then one day the workers dropped their crude stone tools in the workshops and never came back. Their masterpiece, a giant that would have stood 70 feet tall, lies unfinished there among other partly carved work, to this day.

Every one who sees the images of the island, or pictures of them, thinks of questions to ask:

Were the images meant for idols or portraits of ancestors or guardians of the dead?

Did important men get big statues and plain citizens smaller statues?

What catastrophe put an end to the business?

And who were these artists of a forgotten school of sculpture, anyway?

The last question can be answered, to an extent. The others haven't been answered yet, nor many more than you can think of.

The natives of the island today are of a mixed type, some dark, some light. It is realized that the Pacific in prehistoric times was ably navigated by Polynesians who could make voyages of a thousand miles or so in their large canoes. They had bamboo charts on which they marked the courses of guiding stars. So it is not hard to understand how Easter Island could have been reached by adventurous expeditions, and a settlement made there.

The modern natives have traditions about the stone figures and other island antiquities. The memories have worn thin, and fact and fiction are confused. But it is generally supposed that the ancestors of these natives were indeed the possessors of Easter Island's famous old culture.

Accepting that, however, does not begin to solve the mystery. The problems that scientists want to have explained are harder:

Did the first settlers come to the island from South America, or from the west from other islands? That is, was this island an offshoot of America's ancient history, perhaps linked with the Indians of Peru, who were adepts at handling tons of stone? Or was the island's past rooted in some Asiatic homeland?

And did the first settlers bring their uncanny knowledge of stone work and other advanced cultural ideas to the island? Or did they make their own inventions on the spot after they arrived?

If an American anthropologist can show how the giant statues and their makers fit into the world's ancient history, he will win an international contest of wits that has been going on for years.

EASTER ISLAND is known as the explorer's delight. The cloud-scraping mountain peaks of the world may be climbed one by one, and checked off the "things to be done" list. The poles may be flown over and photographed and that's finished. But Easter Island goes on forever.

Almost every year, recently, has seen some restless explorer sailing for Easter Island, 2,000 miles from the shores of Chile and over 1,000 from the nearest island neighbors. Presently the restless explorer is back with strange and entertaining things to tell. But he hasn't spoiled the mystery to any marked extent for the next man to follow him.

A double-barreled attack in one year, however, looks serious. The Europeans have come half way around the world to spend seven months concentrating on the stone faces and the island's other chief evidence from the past, its ancient picture writing.

In all the isles of Polynesia this speck of an island was the one place where aboriginal people could read and write. That written language, consisting of rows of birds, humans and less obvious designs, is a forgotten system. But language experts refuse to give up. Some signs they have translated.

A few years ago the British Royal Anthropological Institute appointed a committee to see what it could do about the Easter Island writings. The committee came back in 1932 with its opinion that the wooden slabs contain, not connected narratives, but notes such as an orator might use to remind him of facts and points in a discourse.

Still, the writings continue to attract scholars, who want particularly to know whether the islands got their language from some distant point or made it up themselves. A written language is a great achievement for men to produce without outside inspiration. One language specialist thought he could find significant clues in the writing, pointing to a link with ancient India.

The present European expedition to Easter Island is handicapped by the recent death of Prof. Luis Wathelin, specialist on inscriptions, who was to have checked on such points as this.

THE American scientists who are turning their faces toward the Southern Pacific have a more varied program than the French-Belgian-Swiss group of scientists. The Americans are to voyage 13,000 miles through the South Seas, with the primary object of gathering data for four habitat groups of South Sea Island birds for the American Museum of Natural History. Three American Museum scientists are accompanying Templeton Crocker, leader of the expedition.

Easter Island is one of the scheduled stopping places for the expedition, however, and an anthropologist is aboard the yacht. So, at that point birds must take second place in the expedition's thoughts.

Shortly before the expedition sailed, one of its members visited the National Museum here in Washington to examine the rare specimens of Easter Island writing on wooden slabs in the National collection.

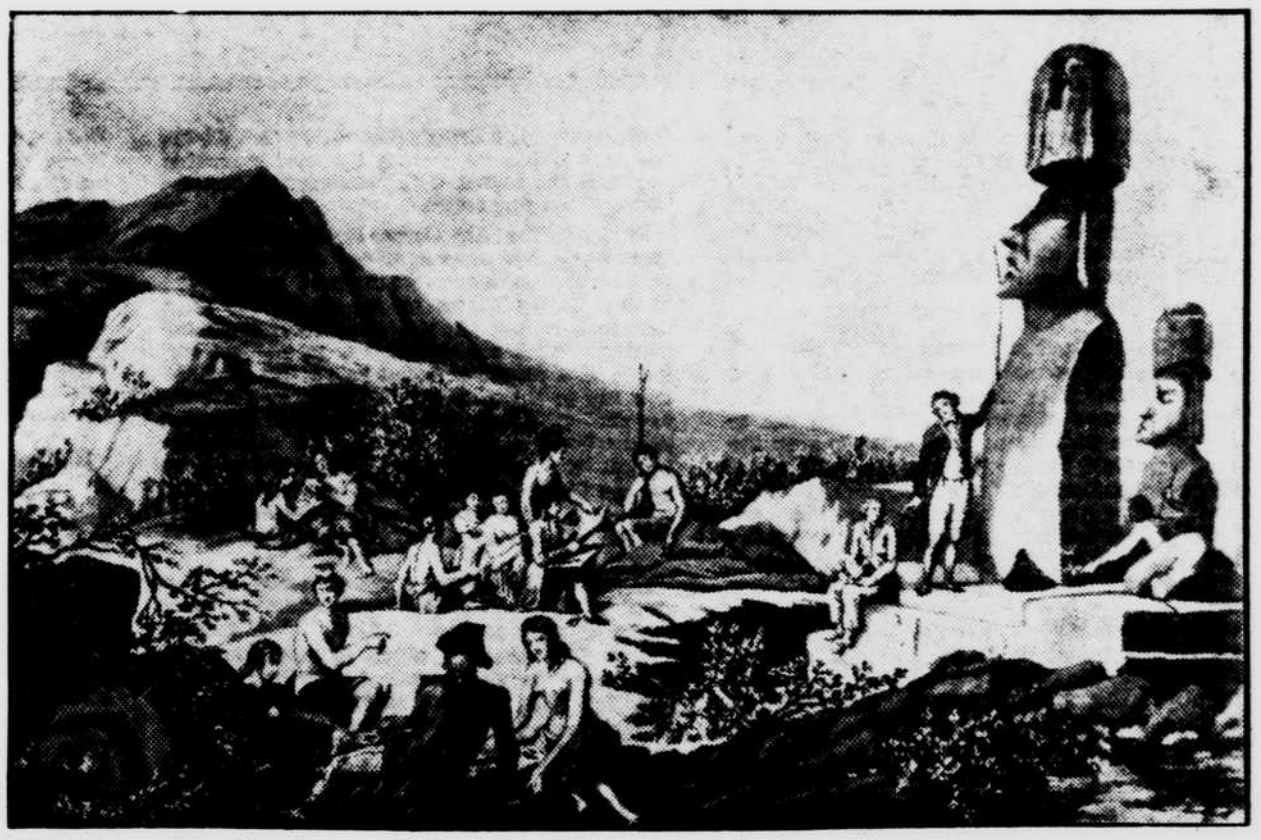
The National Museum profited by the trip of the U. S. S. Mohican to the island in 1886, when Paymaster William Thomson of the Navy wrote a scientific report on the place and brought to Washington several of the wooden inscriptions and two of the sorrowful-looking stone images.

Had Admiral Jacob Roggeveen, eighteenth century Dutch explorer, been a man of science, he could have perhaps solved the mystery of Easter Island before it became nearly so mysterious. When he stepped on the island Easter morning, 1722, and named the island after the day, the great stone images were not lying flat and neglected as they now are. He saw the images in all their towering dignity, standing on great stone platforms.

But the admiral's mind was on other matters than scientific inquiry. His sailors had a scare when they neared the island and saw the curious, excited natives that were milling about the shore. An excited Dutch sailor fired a shot, and there was scuffling. The natives begged for mercy and brought offerings to the strangers. The Dutch party spent the rest of the day on the island in peace, and had a look at the nearby stone images, which they promptly assumed to be extra big idols.

SPANISH, English and French ships adventuring in the Pacific touched upon Easter Island about 50 years after the Dutch visit, measured the stone images, and gaped at the size. They made friends with the women and the Frenchmen returned home singing the praises of the grace and beauty of these native belles, who resembled Europeans in color and feature. But they neglected to question the native maidens about their ancestors, or the cultural aspects of the island's life or its theories about monumental stone art—unfortunately.

By the time the scientific importance of the island was attracting attention, many changes had taken place. Slave traders carried off the cream of the population, including rulers, priests and educated men, to work in guano fields of Peru. Smallpox and tuberculosis preyed on the remaining inhabitants, reducing the number from several thousand to several hundred. Missionaries came, establishing missions and discovering that the island once had the dignity of learning, with men who could read ancient records and write down important happenings. There remained on Easter Island, for science to study only a hundred or so natives who work for a sheep ranch on the island.



French voyagers measured the statues—and made friends with the native maidens—in the eighteenth century, but unfortunately failed to question the natives about the island's past.